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SUBJECT: LONDON MAYORAL ELECTION: A NATIONAL BELLWEATHER?

REF: LONDON 573 AND PREVIOUS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. On May 1 Londoners go to the polls to elect a new Mayor. The incumbent, Labour's Ken Livingstone, is looking to win his third successive term in office but faces a tough challenge from the Conservative candidate, Boris Johnson. At present the race is too close to call. A lot is at stake for both main parties: while a win for Livingstone would not necessarily give Labour a bounce in the polls, a defeat would be seen as another blow to the beleaguered government of Prime Minister Brown. And Labour insiders fear that a win for the Conservatives would provide the invigorated party with a much needed boost, paving the way for a Conservative resurgence in London. Livingstone's hopes for election victory may depend on picking up the support of both the Liberal Democrat candidate and the Green Party challenger. End Summary.

Poll Figures -- A Two Horse Race?

¶2. (SBU) Thirteen candidates are running but, the main contenders are "Ken" and "Boris," the Labour and Conservative party candidates who are both on first name terms with the voters. Livingstone, Mayor of London for eight years, is behind in the polls and under pressure as the race enters its final weeks. Latest poll figures put his conservative rival, Boris Johnson, at 45 per cent with Livingstone close behind at 39 per cent. The candidates are fighting it out on environmental issues, transport and economic development. Livingstone's combative manner and ability to court controversy, vote-winners in the past, appear this time to be turning voters away. Critics say he is wandering far beyond the issues of concern to a Mayor and he appears to be suffering by association from Labour's dismal national poll ratings. Boris Johnson, until now best known as a mistake-prone member of Britain's elite, has defied expectations by surging ahead in the polls. Johnson is campaigning as the candidate of "change" and, although his campaign is accused of being thin on policies, he is picking up support for being "not Ken" and for promising to get rid of the congestion charge. But Boris's lead is shrinking: down from 13 points to six points in the last week.

Support of Other Candidates Vital

¶3. (SBU) Because of the complicated voting system, and the closeness of the race, the spotlight is turning to the third-and fourth-placed candidates: Liberal Democrat Brian Paddick, currently at 13 per cent, and Green Party Candidate Sian Berry, with just two per cent. Neither are in contention themselves but voters get a first and a second preference. And if no candidate gets 51 per cent first time round, second preference votes may decide the election. So far, Paddick has not backed either frontrunner, while Berry has urged her supporters to vote for Ken.

The Candidates

14. (SBU) Livingstone says his record speaks for itself: London has overtaken New York as the world's leading financial center, he successfully introduced the world's first Congestion Charge (tax) and, in 2012, London hosts the summer Olympics, all of which he takes credit for.

15. (SBU) The signs are, though, that Ken has fallen out of favor with Londoners. A well-known figure in London politics for more than 20 years, Ken's initial popularity rested on his image as a political maverick: Margaret Thatcher's Government and his own party hated him in the '80s when he was known as "Red Ken" for his extreme left-wing views. And his refusal to toe the party line endeared him to Londoners who voted for him in droves when he ran as an Independent candidate in London's first Mayoral elections in 2000, (Embassy note. Livingstone ran as independent because then-Prime Minister Blair would not endorse him as Labour's candidate. End note.) Now that Livingstone is seen as part of the Labour establishment, he is having to fight hard to prevent the Party's dismal national ratings from rubbing off on him. Labour's big guns are out in force helping him campaign, as a Conservative win would be a disaster for the Government, in the view of many Labour party members. Although Labour dominates London politics, many of its Parliamentary seats have wafer-thin majorities and would be vulnerable to a resurgent Conservative Party.

16. (SBU) But Livingstone's popularity has fallen for other reasons. His foreign policy forays have been unpopular -- from Livingstone's outspoken criticisms of Israel, to recent ill-advised, taxpayer-funded trips to Cuba and to Venezuela (including inviting Chavez to London on a semi-state visit), as well as his welcoming the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose organization is on record as supporting the stoning of homosexuals. Then there are claims of alleged corruption among some of Livingstone's close aides, and a refusal by Livingstone to name his rich backers, some

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of whom are wealthy property developers who stand to gain from the Mayor's extensive planning powers. Critics in the media say that the Mayoralty is being run as Livingstone's own personal fiefdom, with a political agenda that goes far beyond his remit.

Boris: Gaffe-Prone, but Popular

17. (SBU) Conservative candidate Boris de Pfeffel Johnson's successful candidacy for the mayor of London has defied the laws of political gravity. Johnson is best known as a mistake-prone former journalist twice exposed for committing adultery, now a Conservative MP. Johnson is also well known for apologizing: to the people of Liverpool for accusing them of mawkish sentimentality following the beheading of a resident of the city in Iraq; to the people of Portsmouth after describing the town as "too full of drugs, (and) obesity"; to the people of Papua New Guinea for associating them "with orgies of cannibalism and chief-killing," and to the people of Africa after remarking on their "watermelon smiles". He was also sacked as a member of the Shadow Cabinet for lying about an extra-marital affair.

18. (SBU) Despite this record, Johnson is a popular figure and has built up a vast following in London. The Conservative leadership and Boris' own handlers are limiting his public speeches and appearances to minimize the risks of any foot-in-the-mouth gaffes by their candidate and Johnson is trying hard to dispel the perception that he is not a serious contender. But with his poll lead falling from 13 points to six points in the last week, there are signs that the Mayor's relentless focus on whether Johnson is competent enough to run London may be beginning to have an impact.

Other Candidates

19. (SBU) Liberal Democrat Brian Paddick, the highest ranking openly-gay police officer in Scotland Yard until his retirement, is best known for adopting a more relaxed police approach to soft drugs during his tenure. Although Paddick is rising in the polls, he is still way behind at 12 per cent. His central campaign message is

his promise to cut crime if elected -- opponents say he has no other policies. And Sian Berry, standing on the Green Party ticket with two per cent, is enjoying a high profile, if low numbers, as the other main candidates vie to compete with her on their green credentials.

Congestion, Crime, and Climate

¶10. (SBU) The Congestion Charge, the environment and crime are the central issues in the campaign. Livingstone has pledged to increase the already-controversial Congestion Charge, now copied by many cities around the world, to #25 (approx. 50 USD) per day for the worst polluting cars, and reduce it to zero for the least polluting vehicles, a proposal which the Greens support. But the congestion charge is not the universal vote-pleaser that it once was: despite the charge, congestion in central London remains a problem, the administration of the charge costs millions, and moves to push the zone further westward across the city would be unpopular. Critics say that the policy is now less about congestion and more about revenue-raising. Boris Johnson opposes a price increase in the charge or extension of the zone, saying it will hit business and families, though he will not abolish the existing charge. Johnson has also said he will rid the capital of another Livingstone transportation initiative, the double-length (articulated) 'bendy-bus,' which replaced some double-decker buses on the grounds they were more efficient and are now universally reviled by Londoners. The Liberal Democrats favour a carbon tax on new cars instead of an increase in the congestion charge. The Greens want an increase in the congestion charge.

Environment

¶11. (SBU) The environment is also a high-profile issue in the campaign. Livingstone wants to extend the low-emission zone in London to cover trucks over 3.5 tons and improve public buildings' energy efficiency; Johnson has promised #6m (approx. 12 million USD) to tackle graffiti and improve waste management. He will stop backyard developments, plant 10,000 trees, and force City Hall to buy in greener goods. He also supports a low-emission zone extension. The Liberal Democrats and Greens both oppose expansion of Heathrow Airport. The Greens want more investment in high speed rail links, solar panels on 100,000 roofs by 2015 and free insulation for all homes that need it.

Crime

¶12. (SBU) Crime has become a high-profile issue. Although overall rates of crime have lowered in the last decade, the increase in juvenile violent crime, especially involving knives and guns, is a hot-button topic. Livingstone has promised 1,000 extra police if

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reelected, and to reduce crime by 6 per cent a year; Johnson wants more police on buses, trains and in stations, and knife and gun crime given priority. Brian Paddick says that cutting crime is his top priority, that violent crime has soared and after more than 30 years as a policeman he is the only candidate with the experience to cut gun and knife crime. He would hold the police accountable for their performance, and pledged to cut crime by 20 per cent in four years or not run again for Mayor. Sian Berry for the Greens has called for more community policing.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) With a UK general election not likely until 2010, the effects of this race on the national political scene should not be overstated, but it is clear there will be implications for both parties, particularly Labour. A Livingstone defeat will, according to one senior Labour MP "knock the Labour Party sideways" and further weaken Brown's public image and standing with Labour backbenchers (ref). A Johnson victory will empower the Conservatives, further fuel the perception that public momentum is

on their side, and provide an institutional boost to their efforts to win more parliamentary seats in London when national elections are held. A Boris victory could prove a double-edged sword for Cameron, however. A successful Boris Johnson will give the Tories a chance to show off their policies in the UK's largest city, but if the gaffe-prone Johnson "returns to form" despite his advisors' best efforts," such gaffes will now be amplified across the UK and become a bigger burden for the Tories to bear.